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ABSTRACT

Emergent reading levels are those levels a pupil can sustain under direct guidance or with mediation and support by the teacher. A major implication of the emergent reading level construct is that strategies for reading placement would need to be revised. A study was conducted to ascertain whether the emergent reading level concept is valid and useful in the reading placement of low socioeconomic status (SES), low achieving elementary school students. Nineteen fourth grade students, enrolled in Chapter 1 classrooms, with a reading grade equivalent of 2.7 to 5.00 participated. As a pretest measure, students read a fable at the fifth grade level and answered 20 multiple choice questions. Prior to the reading, the experimenter read the requisite vocabulary, using each word in a sentence. The experimenter then read several poems as an interference measure. A week later, students were randomly assigned to experimental and control groups. The procedure was repeated for the control group. The experimental group received background knowledge on fables and discussed the vocabulary in context. The students then read a fable passage and answered questions. The results showed a significant difference between the groups in the posttest measure, favoring an analytical application concept of emergent reading level with low achieving students. (HTH)

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Is the Emergent Reading Level a Useful
Concept for Chapter I, Low SES Students?

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Conventional wisdom has it that low SES, low achieving students will experience success in school if they are restricted to low level cognitive tasks. This conviction is especially popular among contemporary reading educators. With low SES, low achievers, many educators barely expect them to learn to read and if they do, the level of functioning is at a low cognitive level. A nagging question is: Do low SES, low achievers function at a low cognitive level because this is all they are able to achieve or is their presumed inability due to faulty educational treatment?

In probing this question, several areas of inquiry suggest themselves. One is the testing done to place elementary students in a reading series. In some cases, students are placed in a series according to the level of the last book read in that particular series. Another placement method used is standardized reading test scores to determine the student's reading level. A third method focuses on the results of an informal reading inventory to determine the level of placement. This method, administered individually, consists of several reading passages of various levels of difficulty. The teacher sets a purpose, the student reads silently and/or orally then answers comprehension questions pertaining to the paragraph. In all these methods the role of the teacher is that of a neutral administrator of the test. The interaction between the teacher and student during these situations is usually limited to clarification of directions. This proposal is concerned with the test situation with special attention paid to analyzing the type of interaction between the teacher and student. The results should shed more light on what constitutes an optimum testing situation, more specifically on the reading placement of the population of Chapter I, low SES students to see if they have been underplaced in a reading series because

of the testing situation. Given a different testing practice--a mediated testing situation--could the student be placed in a higher reading book? A mediated test situation is one where there is a dynamic interaction between students being tested and the evaluator. The situation is geared towards a process of testing (and learning) as well as a level of placement. Thus one can provide a more accurate prognosis and educational treatment for the student.

Review of Literature

Proper placement of students in a basal and/or content book for instruction is an ongoing educational concern. The informal reading inventory is one method used to ascertain reading placement. There are differing sets of criteria of the IRI (Betts, 1957 and Powell, 1981). The criteria are established for the purpose of delineating the child's frustration, independent and instructional reading level. However these differing sets of criteria can indicate different reading levels depending on which set of criteria is used. Homan (1978) in a study looking at the Betts and Powell placement criteria found that different placements of students were indicated by the different criteria. Powell's criteria usually placed children at a higher level than Bett's criteria.

A student's placement with the IRI is also dependent on the purpose of giving the IRI. Betts suggested silent reading of the passage first, then oral reading. A student would perform higher with the procedure than just reading orally before responding to the comprehension questions. Powell (1980) emphasized the need for use of differing sets of criteria dependent on whether the IRI is used for diagnosis or for developmental placement. Lovitt and Hansen (1976), in a study of reading placement of learning disabled children, urged that the same strategies be used in placement in the book as with the instruction

of the book. Given the fact that the criteria and administration of IRI can bring about different placement, might a child be inappropriately placed, especially underplaced, in a reading series? The indication seems to be that there needs to be a better concept to come to terms with the current discrepancy in the use of the IRI as a placement strategy.

The emergent reading level is of interest as a useful concept in the reading placement of children. The emergent reading levels are "those levels a pupil can sustain under direct guidance and support by the teacher." (Powell, 1982) The emergent reading level is based on Vygotsky's (1978) "zone of proximal development." This zone is the "discrepancy between a child's actual mental age and the level he reaches in solving problems with assistance." In other words, a student has a base level of functioning in reading that would be concomitant with his/her mental age and a ceiling level. The students can function within this zone with mediation, i.e., instruction with capable tutors/teachers. Vygotsky emphasizes that "instruction precedes development." So given the presumption that a student has a "zone of development" and that "instruction precedes development," might not the emergent reading level be more appropriate in placing children in their reading series?

A major implication of the emergent reading level is that the placement strategies would need to be revised. Currently placement into a book is done without intervention or mediation by the teacher. A consideration of the emergent reading level suggests that the teacher would play an active role in testing the child. It follows then that a student might read higher level books given a mediated strategy of testing. (Of course, once a student is placed in a higher book, instructional mediation is a must.)

Dixon (1982) in a study involving average/above average readers in third and sixth grade using content materials found that with mediation the students

could read and comprehend materials two grade levels above their current grade placement. Does this concept hold true for other types of students-- i.e., low SES, low achievers? Could they be placed at a higher level with mediation during the testing? This pilot study is an attempt to address the issue of the emergent reading level as it pertains to low achievers. This study is also interested in the use of narrative rather than content material.

Purpose

The purpose of this pilot study was to ascertain whether the emergent reading concept is a valid and useful educational construct in the reading placement process of low SES, low achieving elementary students. If this initial pilot study indicates support of the concept, then appropriate replications are indicated.

Methodology

Subjects--This study focused on students who were low achievers and were in schools that had large concentrations of low SES students. The number of students on free and reduced lunch is the criteria for establishing the percentage of low SES students in a given school. The two schools involved have 60-70 percent of the student population on free/reduced lunch. Nineteen fourth grade students enrolled in three Chapter I classrooms were chosen (and agreed) to participate in the study. The students' assignment into Chapter I (old Title I) classrooms indicate school achievement is below average. The students' reading level as indicated by the reading score of the Metropolitan Achievement Test ranged from grade equivalent of 2.7 to 5.0. Only one student received the 5.0, the rest were mainly in the grade equivalent range of 2.7 to 3.7.

Instrumentation

The experimenter used a fable, Androcles and the Lion, for the study. The passage was 485 words in length with a readability level of 5.0 using the Harris Jacobson I readability formula. This indicates a passage that was mainly one to two years above the grade placement of the students.

The experimenter then used a story grammar outline such as suggested by Marshall (1983) to write 20 multiple choice questions for the student to answer following the reading of the passage.

Procedure

The passage was given to all the students as a pretest measure. Before reading the passage, the experimenter read the vocabulary words once, used in a sentence and the students read the words. A simple purpose was established, passage read and questions answered. After this was completed the experimenter read several poems from Shel Silverstein's The Light at the Attic as an interference measure.

A week later, the students were randomly assigned to an experimental and control group. (eight in control group, eleven in experimental group, one child from control absent) The previously mentioned procedure was duplicated for the control group. The experimental group received the following treatment. Building background in order to set the purpose was first. We briefly discussed what fables were, other fables they might know and to read "to determine the lesson of this fable." After that we reviewed the vocabulary words, talked about them and read the word again. For example, gratitude was one of the vocabulary words. The mediation was: gratitude--"It is proper to express our gratitude when someone does something nice for us. What do you think it means? Do you ever show gratitude? When? How about if . . . happens? So, gratitude means" This was done for the seven vocabulary words. This procedure

took approximately five to ten minutes. The students read the passage and answered the questions.

Data Analysis

The analysis of covariance was used to analyze the results. The pretest score was the covariant; the two groups (experimental and control) will be used as the categorical variable. The independent variable is the post-test score.

Results

There was a significant difference between the groups in the post-test measure with a F score of 5.48, p of .0325. The adjusted mean score for the control groups was 11.8 and for the experimental group 14.3. There is a 2.5 point difference between the two groups on the post-test measure.

Discussion

The evidence suggests an analytical application concept of emergent reading level with low achieving students. Mediation is of crucial importance. Having thoughtful, corrective feedback on crucial concepts underlying the vocabulary and passage with a knowledgeable tutor is the key to the emergent reading concept. Instruction (mediation) should then involve the concepts to learn (products) as well as precessing strategies to use in other contexts. Thus the mediation is an ongoing process of leading the students to develop more complex processes while simultaneously mastering the concepts (products) needed to show adequate knowledge of content.

One could argue that the extra time involved with the experimental group alone accounted for the difference on the post-test.

However the subject of interest is not the time involved as much as the type of social interaction between the experimenter/teacher and pupils. The mediation involved building an appropriate background, i.e., discussing fables, what the essence of fables is, and any fables the subjects knew. Thus the students could link the passage with what they knew fables were about and thereby comprehend the passage better. (In other words, the students, by learning to appreciate the concept of "fable," had progressed to a level of analysis which facilitated their learning to read content written in the fable genre.) The other major difference between the control and experimental group is the type of vocabulary development. We established the words in context, clarified what the words meant and used them in context again. Again, the students were involved in activating their cognitive processes to link pre-existing knowledge to the new concepts being introduced. Thus the difference is one where the mediation involved establishing students' knowledge and their active, corrective feedback to arrive at a more appropriate process to enable students to comprehend more difficult passages than that indicated by their current grade placement.

While the study supports the heuristic power and usefulness of the emergent concept, the study needs to be replicated with other low achieving students with both narrative and content materials. The sample size was low due to the time of study (May and the students didn't want to take another "test"). Also, many of the parental consent forms were lost, etc. Increasing the sample size would not only lend more support to data, but increase the amount of confidence one has in the study. Of interest also, would be an attempt to establish

increase the amount of confidence one has in the study. Of interest also, would be an attempt to establish some type of zone of development for these students. Without knowledge of their zone of development, the mediation, would not be as fruitful as otherwise could be the case. Another research area which is suggested is to look at various types of social interaction/mediation to arrive at more appropriate instructional interaction systems. Thus the tentative step of establishing the validity of the emergent reading concept for low SES, low achieving students was successful.

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